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Where was Kennedy's body that day?



After 26 years many aspects of the assassination of President Kennedy remain as puzzling as ever. The events in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, probably have been documented as thoroughly as they can ever be, given the fact that witnesses have scattered and most of the Secret Service agents involved have either retired or passed on. New generations have been born who look upon the events as history, to be studied perhaps along with the Lincoln assassination.

To some researchers, however, what happened at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland later that day has continued to be troublesome. Efforts to document what went on before and during the autopsy on President Kennedy's body immediately ran into a wall of silence.

Although it was not revealed at the time, all Navy personnel involved had been sworn to secrecy under threat of court-martial. Each person had been forced to sign a document to that effect, and the gag order had proved to be almost 100 percent effective.

As time passed, rumors began circulating that some details of the Bethesda activities contained in the Warren Commission Report were not true or had been presented in misleading terms. Researchers heard rumors of decoy ambulances moving along the route from Andrews Air Force Base, where the presidential plane landed, and Bethesda Hospital on the other side of Washington, D.C. Then came reports that still a third ambulance or hearse had been involved. Some writers seized upon these rumors to imagine all manner of dark conspiracies involving hundreds of people.

Now we have some explanations provided in a book titled "Best Evidence" by David S. Lifton, first published in 1980 and recently updated for current sale. Lifton spent thousands of dollars on telephone calls in patiently tracking down retired U.S. Navy personnel who had worked at Bethesda Hospital on that tragic day. After he convinced the men that the secrecy order had been quietly rescinded by the government in 1978, they revealed the answers to many questions that had plagued historians for years.

We know that Mrs. Kennedy had sat beside the bronze casket containing her husband's body as the plane returned from Dallas. Television cameras at the scene showed us that she had also accompanied the casket in the Navy ambulance on the road trip from Andrews to Bethesda. But, according to Lifton, the bronze casket in the ambulance was empty.

The president's body had been removed from the bronze casket at some point, placed into a body bag and then into a shipping casket, a cheap aluminum container with thumbscrews holding the lid on. The body then had

been flown by helicopter from Andrews to the rear area of the Bethesda Hospital grounds. A hearse from a local funeral home had met the helicopter there and transported the body into the hospital loading dock area where it was taken into the autopsy room.

After a lengthy search by telephone, Lifton finally located the two X-ray technicians who had taken the pictures, Edward Reed and Jerrol F. Custer, both retired. Custer carefully had avoided questioning by the House Select Committee that had held hearings in 1978, but after being convinced by Lifton that the secrecy order was no longer in force, he agreed to talk. What he told Lifton was later confirmed by other retired Navy men.

Custer said that after he took the X-ray pictures of Kennedy's body, he was accompanied by a Secret Service agent as he walked to the hospital lobby where an elevator would take them to a developing lab on an

upper floor.

While he and the agent were standing there waiting for the elevator, he saw Mrs. Kennedy walk through the front entrance into the lobby. He remembered the scene vividly, he said, because Mrs. Kennedy still had on the blood-stained dress she had worn in Dallas. Custer said that the agent had immediately led him out of the lobby until Mrs. Kennedy and her party had gone upstairs. The agent was not happy that Custer had seen Mrs. Kennedy.

It is well documented that Mrs. Kennedy had gotten out of the Navy ambulance containing the bronze casket at approximately 7 p.m. and had gone in the front entrance to the lobby. Since Custer was holding the X-ray film of her husband's body at that moment, it is obvious that the body had been at Bethesda for quite some time prior to her arrival.

Although Lifton sees this situation as part of a huge conspiracy, his belief will not stand close scrutiny. I have gone back and checked my files to refresh my memory of that fateful day.

I recall someone telling me that Lyndon Johnson initially had been convinced that a conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States was unfolding and for that reason he had insisted upon being sworn in as president before the plane left Dallas. The ceremony had taken place inside the presidential aircraft for security reasons. Others told me that Johnson immediately had begun to issue orders to defeat that conspiracy. With this in mind, it is not difficult to see what must have taken place as the presidential party

made its way back to Washington.

What happened apparently was orchestrated by the Secret Service with Johnson's approval. The government had received a tip that somebody planned to hijack the Navy ambulance along the road and steal Kennedy's body, thus convincing the American people that some evil empire was about to take over the country.

Since there was no time to check out the rumor, the agents did what had to be done. They had one Navy ambulance with a police escort carry the empty bronze Dallas casket to Bethesda while a second Navy ambulance with another empty casket made its way to Bethesda by a different route. By the time these vehicles got under way, the body of the president already was inside the secure autopsy room at Bethesda. To this day there has been no official account of this operation, nor do we know whether there really was a plan to steal the president's body.

Secret Service agents at Bethesda did a superb job of faking out the people who were later admitted to the autopsy room. The president's body was taken out of the shipping casket and the body bag and put back into the bronze casket. This then was loaded into the Navy ambulance and brought back into the autopsy room by the official honor guard supplied by the Military District of Washington. In this way many officials honestly could state later that they had been there to see the body taken out of the bronze casket and placed on the autopsy table.

This is just one of the many fascinating stories told by the retired Navy men who obviously want our history books to tell what really happened on that terrible day in 1963. As someone said, sometimes truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

(SOURCE: Lifton, David S., "Best Evidence, Disguise and Deception in the Assassination of John F. Kennedy", Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., New York, 1980 and 1988.)

Brent Hughes, now retired and living in Boiling Springs, was an FBI information specialist assigned to assist the bureau's investigators in Dallas